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ABSTRACT

At one time communication scholars could go their merry way, secure in the notion that their departments would continue to receive ample funding. However, recent assaults on established and recognized communication departments around the country are more than shots across the bow from administrators and even colleagues from other academic departments. These shots threaten the very existence of communication departments. One of the reasons communication departments have been the target of cutbacks is that they have not adequately defined their field for those outside it. A major step was taken recently when 100 communication administrators gathered to identify and list integral concepts for the discipline. In the trend toward increased specialization, the communication discipline has splintered itself to the point that core understandings and principles are no longer recognizable. A quick glance through convention programs shows a myriad of divisions, committees, caucuses, and sections. Department names for communication vary from university to university. Further, the tendency to define communication as a vocational field makes it suspect in the eyes of "back to basics" administrators. One step to help communication students identify and appreciate the convergence of subdisciplines is to offer a single introductory course for communication study. What communication scholars must now do is (1) define the field so that it secures its rightful place in the center of the liberal arts program; (2) enter communication courses into the general distributional requirements framework of the university; and (3) lobby for communication programs in universities that do not now have them. (Contains 13 references.) (TB)

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Recapturing the Role of Communication Arts and Sciences in Liberal Edcuation: Selling it to the Academy

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Recapturing the Role of Communication Arts and Sciences in Liberal Education: Selling it to the Academy

There was a time when communication studies departments could go their merry ways. Enrollments were at least stable, if not growing, thanks in part to required public speaking courses at many schools. Program expansion was encouraged at many institutions and specialization was valued. But that was before campuswide enrollment trends began to turn down. That was before universities began to follow the corporate world mindset of downsizing. That was before "back to basics" became a priority for administrators. And that was before notions like "assessment" and "accountability" came to the forefront. The academic world is undergoing radical change. As Robert Avery told in his 1995 Western States Communication Association Conference presidential address (with insight from Bill Eadie), communication scholars can "no longer afford the luxury of living in our own little worlds." In other words, the "party" is over (Avery, p. 247).

Recent assaults on established and recognized communication departments around the country are much more than shots across the bow from administrators and even colleagues from other academic departments. These assaults threaten not just certain communication programs at certain universities, but directly challenge the academic relevance and intellectual integrity of the communication discipline. When programs are singled out for outright elimination, and not just routine downsizing or cutbacks,

administrators are clearly saying they view the study of communication as insignificant within the scope of higher education. The challenges have come at many major, research institutions like Nebraska, Washington, Arizona, and Oregon. And the challenges are being seen at other types of institutions as well. For example, Albion College, a highly regarded liberal arts college in Michigan, recently targeted the communication program for elimination. The move had the support of the administration and the major faculty committees. The rationale for the elimination was that since people talked in all academic areas, there was no need to maintain a department that focused on how to talk. Not surprisingly, no similar argument about writing was created for possibly eliminating the English department. Although the communication faculty managed to save the major at Albion, the program will face severe cutbacks. Needless to say, communication departments around the country are vulnerable.

Further evidence that the communication studies world is changing comes in the form of forced mergers of communication related departments at a number of institutions (Northern Illinois and Ohio State, for example, among others). While this convergence of departments (and contexts of communication study) is in most regards a positive development, the fact that administrations are forcing such moves is troubling. It is troubling on one hand because communication faculty who study the same overall process could not see to make such transitions on their own. It is also troubling in that administrators who likely have little

appreciation and insight to communication study are engineering the future structure and content of the discipline on many campuses.

Overall, the scholars in the discipline of communication have done an ineffective job of doing what they study -- communicating. It is clear that all too many administrators, trustees, and even those in the professional world have little sense of what communication study does, and how it benefits both students and the society as a whole. The responsibility for that deficiency lies solely with the academic communication community. If the study of communication is to survive into the 21st century, the time is now for the communication discipline to define itself, effectively structure itself, and then place itself into the central role it deserves in the academy.

Causation

Those who study in the field of communication can hardly understand why other academicians would question the discipline's centrality to the university community. Unfortunately, the confusing messages sent by the discipline have made this centrality difficult for those outside the discipline to identify.

Splintering

Higher education as a whole has been accused in recent years of trying to study more and more about less and less. This might be especially true of the communication discipline. In the trend towards increased specialization, the communication discipline may have splintered itself to the point where core understandings and principles are no longer recognizable. How can the discipline

prove its centrality to the mission of higher education when it has difficulty agreeing on what is central to itself? A quick glance through the convention program of the Speech Communication Association shows a myriad of divisions, committees, caucuses, commissions, and sections. Department names for the study of communication vary from university to university. Many universities have separate departments for studying different contexts of communication -- rhetoric and public address, interpersonal communication, theatre, mass communication (and even such subcontexts as advertising, public relations, broadcasting, etc.). This artificial separation of contexts in communication is about as senseless as if the discipline were to divide into departments labeled as sender, message, channel, receiver, feedback, and so on. Think of how curious it would be to the university community if other departments began to subdivide by various content areas. Outside departments would certainly be puzzled if history departments suddenly divided into separate departments of recent history, middle ages history and so forth. Or how about separate departments of American, European, and Asian history, for example? The point is that core disciplines like history, literature, psychology, etc. have maintained an umbrella identity even while allowing for subspecialties. Granted, communication study might have a tougher task in keeping a consistent vision. After all, as a crossroads discipline, communication is studied from many perspectives -- the humanities, the arts, and the social sciences. But the lack of disciplinary

definition has created confusion among administrators and colleagues outside the field, and they will hardly support intellectually or with resources those areas they can barely comprehend.

Vocationalism

Academic programs that are viewed as too vocational will surely be in trouble in the eyes of "back to basics" administrations. Disciplines are being challenged to demonstrate how what they study is of value to the university community as a whole. Insight and effectiveness in communication is perhaps the basic understanding a broadly educated student in this era needs. Over the centuries, liberally educated people were expected to be effective speakers/communicators. Communication scholars should be well aware that the discipline's roots are in the ancient Greek and Roman traditions. But those traditions are blurred and essentially ignored when communication course offerings are defined in terms related to specific vocations in today's job markets. When the academic community sees a course labeled as business speaking, they do not see a liberal arts course of use to all liberally educated students. They see specific job preparation, or vocationalism. Competence in public speaking should be a lifelong competence and understanding. A course such as business speaking suggests that speaking in a business circumstance somehow is done independent of effective speaking in other contexts. The same difficulty is found in other types of course labelings. Communication educators should carefully consider the vocationalism

messages sent with course titles in public relations, video production, and so on. Do students take courses in public relations to get into public relations jobs, or do they take them to understand the principles of systematic persuasion? Can students studying video production become more enlightened consumers of video messages as opposed to just learning how to operate technology for entry level television jobs? Even in courses like interpersonal communication, are students being provided in-depth understanding of communication in human relations? Or, like many of the discipline's detractors claim, are students merely being provided cookbook tips on how to manage a relationship or pull off a business interview? A discipline that intends to be central to a university must provide course content and course titles that demonstrate a concern for total person education, and not just basic skills training for students entering specific jobs.

Consequences

The splintering of the discipline and the pandering to vocational interests have left communication departments open to a great deal of scrutiny and criticism. Traditional liberal arts departments across the campus (many of which are seeing their enrollments on the decline), see these signals as indications that the study of communication lacks depth and direction. This sort of political baggage is highly damaging in administrative and faculty committees that wrestle with resources, staffing, and curriculum design. In the absence of other evidence, these

committees define for themselves the role (or lack of) for communication in the academy. Departments that can not be defined as central will suffer in prestige and status, regardless of the lofty enrollments enjoyed by many communication departments. In fact, the large enrollments of communication departments could make them even more likely targets for assault from disciplines that have experienced enrollment declines. The turf of communication studies would happily be divided among competing departments. Public relations and advertising courses could be routed to economics departments, interpersonal and organizational communication could be routed to psychology, media effects study could land in sociology departments, and theatre study and rhetoric could be stolen into English departments. Indeed, the future of the discipline is at stake in an environment of declining resources and wandering identity.

Avenues to Pursue

Those who study communication can fully appreciate the relevance of the discipline. The challenge now is to effectively detail that relevance for the rest of the academic community. The effort can and should be broad-based and dynamic.

Definition

A key to defining the discipline is for communication scholars to recognize their roots in rhetoric and oratory. This will be difficult for many in the communication discipline who have built careers on social scientific methods that surely never entered into the discussions of Aristotle, Cicero, etc. But to ignore these

roots is to give away a key defining perspective in the battle to define centrality. Finding a place in the traditional liberal arts (especially a place that is rightfully based!), gives the discipline a foundation and legitimacy that is otherwise absent.

> Our rhetorical scholars trace our academic linage from Aristotle and proclaim our academic home as deeply rooted as the humanistic study of philosophy, English, Literature or Languages (Avery, p. 247).

The next step in the definition challenge is for the discipline to bring itself together and carefully and succinctly indicate what it studies. A major step in this direction was taken in the summer of 1995 when approximately one hundred communication administrators gathered (under the guidance of the Association for Communication Administration) to identify and list integral concepts for the discipline. The conference developed this definition of the discipline:

> The field of communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels and media. It promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication.

Of course, this definition might not be written exactly the way each communication scholar would prefer. But it does accomplish several key objectives. It defines the range of matters communication scholars investigate. It also provides communication scholars a simple and effective answer to provide administrators who are prone to ask about exactly what is studied in communication. And, of course, the definition welcomes the many avenues for inquiry that make the communication discipline so dynamic.

This effort to define the discipline should provide the impetus for a convergence of the many subdisciplines that have created separate departments for themselves. Scholars in varying contexts of communication can learn a lot from each other. They can also benefit politically on campus by providing a unifying vision of the discipline to the rest of the academy. But most important, this convergence can provide a meaningful perspective on the communication discipline for students. Communication students need to understand that the overall process of communication still gives scholars who study various contexts more in common than they have in disagreement. Students should not be given a message that one sort of communication is here and another is there.

One simple step to help communication students identify and appreciate the convergence of subdisciplines is to offer a single introductory course for communication study. Many communication departments offer a potpourri of intro courses that are not introductions to the discipline, but rather introductions to contexts in the discipline. These intro courses look like a shopping list in a college catalogue -- intro to public speaking, intro to interpersonal communication, intro to mass media. A more effective introduction to the discipline would be to provide all students a single course that focuses on the various aspects of the communication process (messages, symbols, feedback, channels, and so on), with accompanying discussion of how these elements are relevant in each context.

An economist, writing about the importance of talk and persuasion in the economic world, recently commented that "...colleges need a group of scholars to study the whole elephant of communication in society (McCloskey, p. 15)." Those potential scholars already exist, but they may have been failing to get a good look at the entire elephant. It is noteworthy that a scholar from another discipline has identified what might well be a key factor in asserting the importance of the communication discipline to the university.

Crossroads

Communication has frequently been referred to as a crossroads discipline. What is studied and learned in communication is of interest to scholars in many fields. Rhetorical understanding has a place in the study of political science. Interpersonal communication has a close relationship to some aspects of the study of psychology. Media effects research has application in sociological study. People who study in communication should well understand these applications, but scholars in other fields might well be unaware of the content and literature of the communication field. Those other scholars might not grow to this awareness unless communication scholars build the bridges. McCloskey has written, "The best colleges and universities engage in trade across fields (p. 12)." He goes on to say, "Communications is where the academic fields meet, overlap, and converse (p. 15)." Engaging colleagues from across campus should provide benefits for both sides of the scholarly interaction. It also helps make those

colleagues aware of the substance of the communication field. That could well be helpful when those colleagues are members of curriculum, resource allocation, or evaluation committees.

Curricular Inclusion

Disciplines that intend to take their places within the liberal arts provide coursework and insight for students who will not necessarily major in that discipline. Although enrollment pressures from majors sometimes makes it difficult, communication studies departments must make every effort to enroll students from across the campus. Understanding and competence in communication are essential for people who intend to be successful in citizenship and careers. But some communication programs restrict course access to majors. This is more likely to be true in media studies areas where all too often media understanding is believed to be reserved only for those students who intend to become media practitioners. Restricted access is also found in the cocurricular offerings of some communication departments -- student media participation is only for media majors, theatrical productions are produced only by theatre arts students, debate participation is only for speech communication students, etc. Disciplines that expect to fit within the liberal arts framework of a university must provide opportunities and access for any student wishing to be liberally educated.

Efforts can and should be made to enter communication courses into the general education framework of the university. One midwestern university has listed several of its courses in the

university's list of courses that meet general education distribution requirements in the arts and self-expression. This department also has taken a leadership role in the "speaking-across-the-curriculum" program, both from a coordination perspective and by offering a number of courses that allow for meeting the speaking competence requirement.

National Marketing

The leaders of the communication discipline have a key role to play in helping to raise the status of the study around the nation. They must interface with leaders of other disciplines to define the communication field and look for common ground in curricular and research areas. Communication leaders should identify prominent colleges (some Ivy League, some significant liberal arts schools, etc.) that currently do not have communication studies programs and approach key administrators and faculty about this omission. Successful programs can be established and flourish at institutions that previously had no structured communication studies programs. Texas A & M University is a key example of an institution that has successfully built a communication studies program from the ground up, beginning only in 1982.

The national leaders can also aggressively market what is learned in the discipline's journals. The nation's news media might have an interest in what communication scholars are learning. And although much of what appears in journals might be beyond the reach of average news consumers, more lofty research conclusions

can be shared with academic deans, secondary teachers, and other key constituencies.

Society Needs Communication Study

The centrality of communication study is well known to the scholars in the discipline. But that centrality must be articulated to the society at large. Communication is an essential aspect of virtually all of society's major issues and concerns. That fact needs to be made obvious and applicable for colleagues in other disciplines, for administrators, for students, for the news media, and for citizens. Communication is critical in the study of interpersonal relationships. The development of the superinformation highway needs input from communication theorists and ethicists. Communication problems are at the root of many cultural and ethnic divisions in America and throughout the world. Rhetorical and media scholars can provide essential insights to issues of censorship and the free flow of information in a free society. Organizational communication scholars can analyze and treat communication problems in corporate structures. The list is rather endless, as most communication academicians would agree. But a major question is whether academic, civic, and corporate leaders think to include communication analysts when solving the problems of organizations, government, social ills, free expression, etc. If society's leaders do not include the communication community in discussing such matters, then it is likely that communication scholars have failed to effectively communicate the importance of their own discipline. Beyond the

practicalities of campus politics and survival in the university community, this failure of the communication discipline would be the most devastating, for we would not only have let ourselves down, but many others as well.

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